College Readiness, Alternative School Students, and Implications from Texas

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Abstract

States require graduating high school students meet college and career ready standards (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; Musoba, 2010). Many states, including Texas, have established histories of alternative education programs for students unsuited or unsuccessful in traditional schools. Alternative programs are generally exempt from demonstrating college readiness, but in Texas have been required to report scores on the same indicators since SY2007-08. This article reviews Texas data to ask whether college readiness indicators work for alternative school based on comparisons between regular and alternative school data. While more students graduate from alternative schools with diplomas beyond the minimum, they rarely participate in advanced coursework, or take college entrance exams, and of those who do, less than 10% pass. Only one third are deemed college ready by Texas standards, suggesting the remediation goals and limited accessibility to academically advanced coursework makes college readiness assessments incongruous for alternative schools as currently defined.

Alternative Schools and College Readiness

Acknowledging that not all students are successful in traditional high school, Texas law allows districts to create separate campuses with specialized instruction, scheduling, or other programs to encourage reduction or recovery of dropouts. In 2011, the 451 registered alternative campuses graduated 5.2% (> 16, 300) of students completing high school in the state (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2011a). Texas eligibility as an alternative school requires that the majority of students enrolled are identified by at-risk factors for school failure and early exit. These factors include academic failure, lack of course credits, failure to pass state exams, pregnancy and parenting, involvement in juvenile court, participation in the foster care system, homelessness, and other gauges of need (TEA, 2011b; Texas Education Code, [TEC] §29.081 (d)).

This precludes highly specialized or college preparatory schools from designation as alternative schools. Typically, districts develop alternative programs with remedial, individualized, accelerated, or job-oriented content in set-aside programs, including residential facilities, discipline alternatives, or charter schools (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Success most often is measured by improved grades, increased attendance, recovery of credit, and ultimately graduation rates (Aron, 2006).

College Readiness Indicators in Texas

College readiness is assessed by six key indicators:

1. Completion of advanced and or dual high school-college credit course(s);
2. Completion of a high school academic program that exceeds minimum state requirements and meets the Recommended High School Program (RHSP), or more rigorous Distinguished Achievement Program (DAP);
3. Completion and successful passage of at least one Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) course;
4. Meeting or exceeding benchmark scores on the high school exit exam in both mathematics and English language arts;
5. Meeting or exceeding required scores on the Texas college admissions test (Texas Success Initiative, Higher Education Readiness Component) in both mathematics and English language arts; and,

6. Meeting or exceeding state benchmarks on either the ACT or SAT college admissions exams.

Study Methods and Findings

Texas provides a worthwhile testing ground to consider the appropriateness of college readiness standards for alternative education. Aggregate results from all high schools are posted on the state education agency website, offering snapshots of overall performance from SY 2007-08 through SY 2010-11 (TEA, 2011a; 2011b). Cumulative sample means of the six college readiness indicators between traditional and alternative schools were analyzed with independent *t* tests to show degree of difference between the two groups. Despite *t* tests limitations of theoretical validity or importance of the independent variable (Studemund & Cassidy, 1997), this beginning evaluation showed significant differences in college readiness between alternative and traditional school.

Academically Advanced Coursework

As indicated in Table 1, there are stark differences between alternative and traditional schools in participation in academically advanced courses and earned higher level diplomas. The number of students earning high level diplomas has increased for both alternative (AEC) and traditional high school students. Alternative student higher level diploma attainment grew from 37.4% in SY 2007-08 to just over half, 51.3% in SY 2010-11. Traditional high school student attainment was higher but grew slower from 80% to 84.7% in the same period. Advanced Placement (AP) or other dual high school/college credit courses has also increased for all students, but still represents a very small percentage of alternative students, with only 6% participation in SY 2010-11. It is even less likely that an alternative student (2% of total) will participate in either Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses compared to about 22% of tradition high school students. Interestingly, if an alternative school student takes end of course AP or IB exams, the data indicates they are similarly likely to pass.

Table 1

College Readiness Academically Advanced Course Participation and Performance Indicators

Indicator		2008		2009		2010		2011	
		AEC	Trad	AEC	Trad	AEC	Trad	AEC	Trad
Completing RHSP/DAP	#	4,556	183,214	5,563	199,559	7,267	210,695	8,388	223,741
	%	37.4	80	45.9	83.1	51.9	84.2	51.3	84.7
Credit for Advanced/Dual Courses	#	2,185	273,165	2,363	289,836	2,570	311,842	2,996	340,120
	%	4.6	22.8	5.1	23.8	5.5	25.4	6	27.1
Advanced Placement/IB Participation	#	83	97,309	99	104,573	100	109,306	149	120,981
	%	0.5	21	0.6	21.6	0.5	22	0.8	23.6
Performance	#	70	49,123	48	52,395	45	55,963	75	61,428
	%	84	50	48.5	50.1	45	51.2	50.3	50.8

Standardized Test Scores

To be college-ready, Texas graduates must meet specified criteria on the state high school exit or ACT or SAT college admissions exams. Table 2 shows that over the last four years the percent of students taking college admission exams has decreased. In 2008, only 8.4% alternative compared to 72% traditional students took these exams. By 2011, only 6.5% alternative compared to 66.2% traditional students took the exams. Interestingly, state designated passing rates have not improved, remaining constant at 27% for traditional students and decreasing from 10% to 7.2% for students enrolled in alternative schools.

The Texas Success Initiative (TSI) Higher Education Readiness Component is a statewide postsecondary admissions test also used to measure college readiness (TEA, 2011c). In both English Language Arts and Mathematics, all students have shown improvement. Alternative schools have raised passing rates from 18% to 23%, and traditional schools from 45% to 52.9%. Component analysis of English and math scores show improved achievement for all students, with alternative students making gains, but remaining well below traditional school students.

Table 2

College Readiness Standardized Tests Participation and Performance Indicators

Indicator		2008		2009		2010		2011	
		AEC	Trad	AEC	Trad	AEC	Trad	AEC	Trad
College admissions tests (SAT and ACT)									
Participation	#	928	145,468	756	146,260	769	145,879	975	158,713
	%	8	72	6.8	68	5.9	64.7	6.5	66.2
Performance	#	94	39,396	61	39,871	77	39,338	70	42,819
	%	10	27	8.1	27.3	10	27	7.2	27
College-ready graduates scoring at or above ELA and Math	#	n/a	n/a	927	92,502	1290	104,243	1623	122,683
	%	n/a	n/a	18	45	21	47.6	23	52.9
Texas Success Initiative (TSI)									
Scoring at or above: ELA	#	1,025	140,604	1235	159,253	1162	157,757	1512	178,322
	%	25	57	28	63.2	25	60.6	33	67
Scoring at or above: Math	#	765	137,569	813	155,355	1,137	170,200	1,327	182,391
	%	20	57	20	62.7	27	66.2	32	69

Comparing Alternative and Traditional College Readiness

Table 3 presents cumulative figures demonstrating statistically significant differences between the percentage means of alternative and all other high schools with regard to college readiness in all indicators except the pass rate of students on AP and IB end of course exams. In this category roughly the same percentage of students passed (>50%), although a very small number (n=75) of alternative students had access. Findings revealed no statistically significant difference at the .05 level (t=.707; p = .506).Small school size, short periods of attendance, high mobility, and other factors inevitably statistically skew individual alternative school findings, but it does open up questions about whether more alternative students might succeed at these advanced academic courses given access and proper instruction.

Table 3

College Readiness Standards Indicators Across AECs and Traditional Schools

College Readiness Standards		AEC	Traditional Schools	*t*	p
Percent Completing RHSP/DAP	Mean	46.63	83.00	-10.335	.000
	Std. Dev.	6.72	2.11		
Advanced Course/Dual Enrollment Completion: Percent with Credit for advanced coursework	Mean	5.30	24.78	-19.717	.000
	Std. Dev.	.59	1.89		
AP/IB Participation Results: Percent taking AP/IB courses	Mean	2.08	22.05	-14.015	.000
	Std. Dev.	2.62	1.11		
AP/IB Performance Results: Percent scoring at or above criterion	Mean	56.95	50.53	.707	.506
	Std. Dev.	18.17	.574		
SAT/ACT Participation Results	Mean	6.80	67.73	-37.212	.000
	Std. Dev.	.88	3.15		
SAT/ACT Performance Results: Percent scoring at or above criterion	Mean	8.83	27.08	-25.820	.000
	Std. Dev.	1.41	.15		
College Ready Graduate - Percent Scoring at or above criterion	Mean	20.67	48.50	-10.154	.000
	Std. Dev.	2.52	4.03		
Texas Success Initiative: Percent scoring at or above	Mean	27.75	61.95	-12.083	.000

criterion in ELA	Std. Dev.	3.77	4.22		
Texas Success Initiative: Percent Scoring at or above criterion in Math	Mean	24.75	63.73	-9.981	.000
	Std. Dev.	5.85	5.17		

Conclusions

It is difficult to ascertain whether lower achievement of alternative schools demonstrates failure to adequately advance students academically, the slow pace of progress, or bright spots of improvement. On one hand high-achievement benchmarks may be unrealistic for many alternative students who, by definition, are those in need of remediation. Certainly, high school proficiency and college entrance exams suggest that the majority of students who graduate from alternative schools are not prepared for college work. Yet, Texas data suggest that some alternative students have potential to succeed academically. In fact, there appears to be trends towards more rigorous coursework, high level diplomas, and perhaps even increased access to advanced academic classes. Access and support for advanced curricula may result in improved standardized test scores.

Alternative schools are no longer solely places where ill-prepared students slog through enough lessons to graduate. Rather, alternative schools should serve as a vision of more evenhanded access. Then, questions about appropriate assessments and what constitutes college readiness may more equitably be considered. As the number of alternative settings grow, so does the notion that alternative schools may not nly continue their primary purpose of reducing dropouts, but also expand their vision as reforming institutions that serve the needs of students in ways that may include raised academic standards.

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